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SUBJECT: WORLD AIDS DAY: WHERE IS SIERRA LEONE?

¶1. SUMMARY: As World AIDS Day approaches (Dec. 1), it appears that Sierra Leone's HIV/AIDS prevalence rate is reportedly low, officially at 1.53%, although some sources believe it to be higher. The military's prevalence is higher. Efforts to combat HIV/AIDS are coordinated by the National HIV/AIDS Secretariat, which currently receives funding from the World Bank and the Global Fund, though World Bank funding ends soon. USG support comes directly from USAID and DOD, and indirectly through major inputs via the Global Fund. Sierra Leone is neither a PEPFAR country nor a nation included in the President's Malaria Initiative. Thus, it faces major resource challenges in battling now-chronic illnesses. END SUMMARY.

¶2. CIVILIAN STATUS: As of 2005, Sierra Leonean HIV prevalence is 1.53% according to the National HIV/AIDS Secretariat (NAS) sero-prevalence survey, and 1.6% according to UNAIDS estimates. Some authorities believe the current figures to be low, though, and the ante-natal clinic positive testing rate of 2.9% suggests that may be true. According to UNAIDS, out of the total of 43,000 people living with HIV/AIDS, 26,000 are women and 5,200 are children. HIV/AIDS related efforts are coordinated by the NAS, an independent governmental agency, and implemented by a wide variety of partners, including the Ministry of Health and Sanitation. In the past few years, the greatest areas of progress have been in health care, treatment, and preservation of legal and human rights for people living with HIV/AIDS. Monitoring and Evaluation has been the area of least progress. Of note is the abundance of free anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs, but delivery of testing kits to the provinces is sometimes delayed. The top priority for the NAS is prevention, which has proven difficult as it requires changing people's behavior. Malaria is by far the greatest health challenge facing Sierra Leone. However, HIV/AIDS is of growing concern in 2002, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) sero-prevalence study showed an HIV/AIDS rate of only 0.9%, but did not account for the likely large number of young ex-combatants. There are currently two major sources of funding for anti-HIV/AIDS efforts: the World Bank and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. The Global Fund approved a new grant of \$26,482,115, the first tranche of which is \$9,627,778 and went into effect in July 2007. NAS works with 44 partners in multiple sectors to implement programs with the Global Fund money. Among other things, the Global Fund provides funding for ARV drugs. Conversely, Sierra Leone HIV/AIDS Response Project (SHARP), the four-year World Bank project, is due to end in December, leaving NAS without funding for salaries, building rent, and several initiatives throughout the country. Despite Parliament action in budgeting money, no funds have actually been provided to the NAS by the GOSL.

¶3. MILITARY STATUS: The most recent prevalence survey in Sierra Leone is the May 2007 Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) HIV sero-prevalence survey. Though the study's sample size is smaller than the statistical ideal, the surveyed military HIV rate is 3.29%, more than twice the national rate. The 40-59 year old age group had a higher prevalence rate (4.9%) than the 20-39 group (2.97%). Married subjects were more than twice as likely to test positive. Knowledge of HIV transmission was mostly good except regarding mother to child transmission during pregnancy. However, only 23% of respondents had

used a condom during their last sexual contact. According to military physicians, challenges include insufficient drugs for non-HIV/AIDS sexually transmitted infections, condom supplies in some units (largely due to distribution problems), and insufficient HIV test kits. Also, at least half of military physicians seeing HIV/AIDS patients need training in understanding and usage of HIV/AIDS drugs. There is no infectious disease doctor on staff, nor are updated HIV/AIDS reading materials and other resources available to military doctors. There is also little to no home-based or hospice care when ARV drugs fail. One of the major challenges for military medical facilities is that they are required to provide free care to civilians, who make up 70%-80% of the case load. Luckily, anti-retroviral drugs are readily available from the NAS, as they are within the civilian population.

¶4. USG ACTIVITY: At this time, direct USG HIV/AIDS efforts in Sierra Leone come primarily from two agencies, USAID and DOD. USAID has three related projects in Sierra Leone: the USAID/Washington-managed Sport Health Project on HIV/AIDS, the USAID/West Africa-managed Action for West Africa Region (AWARE Reproductive Health and AWARE-HIV), and the West Africa Ambassador's AIDS Fund (WAAF). WAAF is a component of AWARE-HIV/AIDS supporting local NGOs in non-presence countries. USAID/WA supports the NAS for Prevention of Mother-To-Child Transmission (PMTCT), cross-border activities for HIV prevention with neighboring countries, and a Blood Safety Program in a referral hospital. The Defense Attache Office works with the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) through the DOD HIV/AIDS Prevention Program in Sierra Leone (DHAPP SL). In September 2007, DHAPP opened a Voluntary Confidential Counseling and Testing Center (VCCT), which is also open to civilians, at the RSLAF 5th Brigade headquarters in Bo, Sierra Leone's second-largest city. Pending funding, DHAPP hopes to open two more VCCTs in the other provincial capitals, Kenema and Makeni. DHAPP also provides RSLAF with condoms and funds and trains

peer educators. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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(CDC) also conducted the 2002 sero-prevalence survey and funded NAS's testing lab. In terms of indirect aid, the USG is by far the largest donor to the Global Fund, providing nearly 30% of worldwide funding. Sierra Leone is neither a PEPFAR country nor a nation included in the President's Malaria Initiative. The Ambassador will speak at the World AIDS Day Commemoration on December 1, at which the Defense Attaché will also donate t-shirts to HIV/AIDS peer educators and counselors.

¶5. COMMENT: With an unemployment rate of 80%, it is possible that the percentage of sero-positive Sierra Leoneans is truly significantly higher than reported. Add to that the 11 years of war; the number of young soldiers infected yet uncounted is unknown. In addition to official USG support, there are already signs of private sector institutions as exemplified by Baylor College of Medicine's two assessment missions in Sierra Leone. Baylor has established HIV/AIDS centers of excellence elsewhere on the continent. Such a health facility in Sierra Leone would be an apt extension of our and others' international involvement. Such public-private partnerships would make a significant difference as this resource-poor nation must fight not only for democracy but also for a healthy population to move the country forward.

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